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Cacao grows peace

A former coca grower finds a new livelihood in a cacao project funded by USAID.



Photo Staff MIDAS

“Finally I can leave behind the coca business which is dangerous, troubled, and unhappy”

— Lina Benavides, USAID beneficiary.

For ten years, Lina Benavides, a former cook, worked in a coca plantation in the rural area of Saravena, in the department of Arauca. Despite the danger and violence associated with cultivating coca, she processed and sometimes harvested the leaves hoping to raise enough money to buy a house. Lina’s husband was brutally murdered due to his involvement in illegal activities. *“I try not to remember. It’s better. I don’t know who killed him and if I knew there’s nothing I could do. War is very hard and painful”*, she admits.

Lina was threatened and forced to leave her hometown when she refused to join an illegal armed group. Frightened, she fled with her family to the municipality of La Union de Galapagos, in the Department of Santander. There, she learned about a cacao project implemented by the National Association of Cacao Growers (Fedecacao).

Fedecacao receives funding from MIDAS (More Investment for Sustainable Alternative Development), a USAID program that promotes economic and social alternatives to illicit crop production by supporting market driven, private sector-led business initiatives in Colombia.

Today, Lina’s family and others cultivate cacao and she, along with others, attend training courses at the *Escuela de Campo* (Country School), where farmers receive technical knowledge about irrigation management, pest prevention and shade crops. *“I never miss a class because the information is very useful. With the technical advice that I receive, I am able to grow higher quality cacao and sell it at a better price.” This project is wonderful. Finally I can leave behind the coca business which is dangerous, troubled, and unhappy”*.